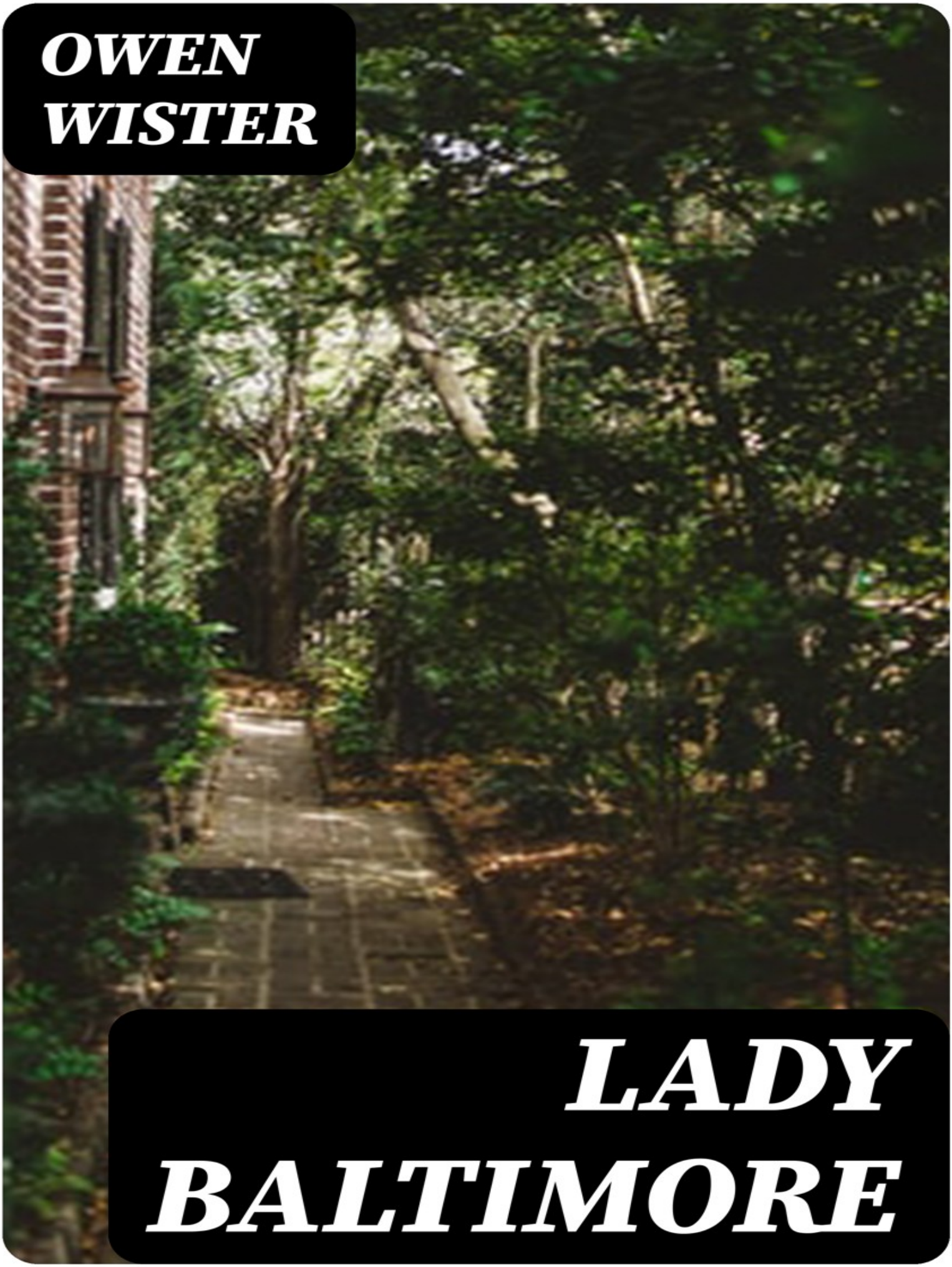
OWEN WISTER
LADY BALTIMORE

Owen Wister

Lady Baltimore

EAN 8596547232032

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

I: A Word about My Aunt

Table of Contents

Like Adam, our first conspicuous ancestor, I must begin, and lay the blame upon a woman; I am glad to recognize that I differ from the father of my sex in no important particular, being as manlike as most of his sons. Therefore it is the woman, my Aunt Carola, who must bear the whole reproach of the folly which I shall forthwith confess to you, since she it was who put it into my head; and, as it was only to make Eve happy that her husband ever consented to eat the disastrous apple, so I, save to please my relative, had never aspired to become a Selected Salic Scion. I rejoice now that I did so, that I yielded to her temptation. Ours is a wide country, and most of us know but our own corner of it, while, thanks to my Aunt, I have been able to add another corner. This, among many other enlightenments of navel and education, do I owe her; she stands on the threshold of all that is to come; therefore I were lacking in deference did I pass her and her Scions by without due mention—employing no English but such as fits a theme so stately. Although she never left the threshold, nor went to Kings Port with me, nor saw the boy, or the girl, or any part of what befell them, she knew quite well who the boy was. When I wrote her about him, she remembered one of his grandmothers whom she had visited during her own girlhood, long before the war, both in Kings Port and at the family plantation; and this old memory led her to express a kindly interest in him. How odd and far away that interest seems, now that it has been turned to cold displeasure!

Some other day, perhaps, I may try to tell you much more than I can tell you here about Aunt Carola and her Colonial Society—that apple which Eve, in the form of my Aunt, held

out to me. Never had I expected to feel rise in me the appetite for this particular fruit, though I had known such hunger to exist in some of my neighbors. Once a worthy dame of my town, at whose dinner-table young men and maidens of fashion sit constantly, asked me with much sentiment if I was aware that she was descended from Boadicea. Why had she never (I asked her) revealed this to me before? And upon her informing me that she had learned it only that very day, I exclaimed that it was a great distance to have descended so suddenly. To this, after a look at me, she assented, adding that she had the good news from the office of The American Almanach de Gotha, Union Square, New York; and she recommended that publication to me. There was but a slight fee to pay, a matter of fifty dollars or upwards, and for this trifling sum you were furnished with your rightful coat-of-arms and with papers clearly tracing your family to the Druids, the Vestal Virgins, and all the best people in the world. Therefore I felicitated the Boadicean lady upon the illustrious progenitrix with whom the Almanach de Gotha had provided her for so small a consideration, and observed that for myself I supposed I should continue to rest content with the thought that in our enlightened Republic every American was himself a sovereign. But that, said the lady, after giving me another look, is so different from Boadicea! And to this I perfectly agreed. Later I had the pleasure to hear in a roundabout way that she had pronounced me one of the most agreeable young men in society, though sophisticated. I have not cherished this against her; my gift of humor puzzles many who can see only my refinement and my scrupulous attention to dress.

Yes, indeed, I counted myself proof against all Boadiceas. But you have noticed—have you not?—how, whenever a few people gather together and style themselves something, and choose a president, and eight or nine vice-presidents,

and a secretary and a treasurer, and a committee on elections, and then let it be known that almost nobody else is qualified to belong to it, that there springs up immediately in hundreds and thousands of breasts a fiery craving to get into that body? You may try this experiment in science, law, medicine, art, letters, society, farming, I care not what, but you will set the same craving afire in doctors, academicians, and dog breeders all over the earth. Thus, when my Aunt—the president, herself, mind you!—said to me one day that she thought, if I proved my qualifications, my name might be favorably considered by the Selected Salic Scions—I say no more; I blush, though you cannot see me; when I am tempted, I seem to be human, after all.

At first, to be sure, I met Aunt Carola's suggestion in the way that I am too ready to meet many of her remarks; for you must know she once, with sincere simplicity and good-will, told my Uncle Andrew (her husband; she is only my Aunt by marriage) that she had married beneath her; and she seemed unprepared for his reception of this candid statement: Uncle Andrew was unaffectedly merry over it. Ever since then all of us wait hopefully every day for what she may do or say next.

She is from old New York, oldest New York; the family manor is still habitable, near Cold Spring; she was, in her youth, handsome, I am assured by those whose word I have always trusted; her appearance even to-day causes people to turn and look; she is not tall in feet and inches—I have to stoop considerably when she commands from me the familiarity of a kiss; but in the quality which we call force, in moral stature, she must be full eight feet high. When rebuking me, she can pronounce a single word, my name, "Augustus!" in a tone that renders further remark needless; and you should see her eye when she says of certain newcomers in our society, "I don't know them." She can make her curtsy as appalling as a natural law; she knows

also how to “take umbrage,” which is something that I never knew any one else to take outside of a book; she is a highly pronounced Christian, holding all Unitarians wicked and all Methodists vulgar; and once, when she was talking (as she does frequently) about King James and the English religion and the English Bible, and I reminded her that the Jews wrote it, she said with displeasure that she made no doubt King James had—“well, seen to it that all foreign matter was expunged”—I give you her own words. Unless you have moved in our best American society (and by this I do not at all mean the lower classes with dollars and no grandfathers, who live in palaces at Newport, and look forward to everything and back to nothing, but those Americans with grandfathers and no dollars, who live in boarding-houses, and look forward to nothing and back to everything)—unless you have known this haughty and improving milieu, you have never seen anything like my Aunt Carola. Of course, with Uncle Andrew’s money, she does not live in a boarding-house; and I shall finish this brief attempt to place her before you by adding that she can be very kind, very loyal, very public-spirited, and that I am truly attached to her.

“Upon your mother’s side of the family,” she said, “of course.”

“Me!” I did not have to feign amazement.

My Aunt was silent. “Me descended from a king?”

My Aunt nodded with an indulgent stateliness. “There seems to be the possibility of it.”

“Royal blood in my veins, Aunt?”

“I have said so, Augustus. Why make me repeat it?”

It was now, I fear, that I met Aunt Carola in that unfitting spirit, that volatile mood, which, as I have said already, her remarks often rouse in me.

“And from what sovereign may I hope that I—?”

“If you will consult a recent admirable compilation, entitled The American Almanach de Gotha, you will find that Henry the Seventh—”

“Aunt, I am so much relieved! For I think that I might have hesitated to trace it back had you said—well—Charles the Second, for example, or Elizabeth.”

At this point I should have been wise to notice my Aunt’s eye; but I did not, and I continued imprudently:—

“Though why hesitate? I have never heard that there was anybody present to marry Adam and Eve, and so why should we all make such a to-do about—”

“Augustus!”

She uttered my name in that quiet but prodigious tone to which I have alluded above.

It was I who was now silent.

“Augustus, if you purpose trifling, you may leave the room.”

“Oh, Aunt, I beg your pardon. I never meant—”

“I cannot understand what impels you to adopt such a manner to me, when I am trying to do something for you.”

I hastened to strengthen my apologies with a manner becoming the possible descendant of a king toward a lady of distinction, and my Aunt was pleased to pass over my recent lapse from respect. She now broached her favorite topic, which I need scarcely tell you is genealogy, beginning with her own.

“If your title to royal blood,” she said, “were as plain as mine (through Admiral Bombo, you know), you would not need any careful research.”

She told me a great deal of genealogy, which I spare you; it was not one family tree, it was a forest of them. It gradually appeared that a grandmother of my mother’s grandfather had been a Fanning, and there were sundry

kinds of Fannings, right ones and wrong ones; the point for me was, what kind had mine been? No family record showed this. If it was Fanning of the Bon Homme Richard variety, or Fanning of the Alamance, then I was no king's descendant.

"Worthy New England people, I understand," said my Aunt with her nod of indulgent stateliness, referring to the Bon Homme Richard species, "but of entirely bourgeois extraction—Paul Jones himself, you know, was a mere gardener's son—while the Alamance Fanning was one of those infamous regulators who opposed Governor Tryon. Not through any such cattle could you be one of us," said my Aunt.

But a dim, distant, hitherto uncharted Henry Tudor Fanning had fought in some of the early Indian wars, and the last of his known blood was reported to have fallen while fighting bravely at the battle of Cowpens. In him my hope lay. Records of Tarleton, records of Marion's men, these were what I must search, and for these I had best go to Kings Port. If I returned with Kinship proven, then I might be a Selected Salic Scion, a chosen vessel, a royal seed, one in the most exalted circle of men and women upon our coasts. The other qualifications were already mine: ancestors colonial and bellicose upon land and sea—

"—besides having acquired," my Aunt was so good as to say, "sufficient personal presentability since your life in Paris, of which I had rather not know too much, Augustus. It is a pity," she repeated, "that you will have so much research. With my family it was all so satisfactorily clear through Kill-devil Bombo—Admiral Bombo's spirited, reckless son."

You will readily conceive that I did not venture to betray my ignorance of these Bombos; I worked my eyebrows to express a silent and timeworn familiarity.

“Go to Kings Port. You need a holiday, at any rate. And I,” my Aunt handsomely finished, “will make the journey a present to you.”

This generosity made me at once, and sincerely, repentant for my flippancy concerning Charles the Second and Elizabeth. And so, partly from being tempted by this apple of Eve, and partly because recent overwork had tired me, but chiefly for her sake, and not to thwart at the outset her kindly-meant ambitions for me, I kissed the hand of my Aunt Carola and set forth to Kings Port.

“Come back one of us,” was her parting benediction.

II: I Vary My Lunch

Table of Contents

Thus it was that I came to sojourn in the most appealing, the most lovely, the most wistful town in America; whose visible sadness and distinction seem also to speak audibly, speak in the sound of the quiet waves that ripple round her Southern front, speak in the church-bells on Sunday morning, and breathe not only in the soft salt air, but in the perfume of every gentle, old-fashioned rose that blooms behind the high garden walls of falling mellow-tinted plaster: Kings Port the retrospective, Kings Port the belated, who from her pensive porticoes looks over her two rivers to the marshes and the trees beyond, the live-oaks, veiled in gray moss, brooding with memories! Were she my city, how I should love her!

But though my city she cannot be, the enchanting image of her is mine to keep, to carry with me wheresoever I may go; for who, having seen her, could forget her? Therefore I thank Aunt Carola for this gift, and for what must always go with it in my mind, the quiet and strange romance which I saw happen, and came finally to share in. Why it is that my Aunt no longer wishes to know either the boy or the girl, or even to hear their names mentioned, you shall learn at the end, when I have finished with the wedding; for this happy story of love ends with a wedding, and begins in the Woman’s Exchange, which the ladies of Kings Port have established, and (I trust) lucratively conduct, in Royal Street.

Royal Street! There’s a relevance in this name, a fitness to my errand; but that is pure accident.

The Woman’s Exchange happened to be there, a decorous resort for those who became hungry, as I did, at the hour of

noon each day. In my very pleasant boarding-house, where, to be sure, there was one dreadful boarder, a tall lady, whom I soon secretly called Juno—but let unpleasant things wait—in the very pleasant house where I boarded (I had left my hotel after one night) our breakfast was at eight, and our dinner not until three: sacred meal hours in Kings Port, as inviolable, I fancy, as the Declaration of Independence, but a gap quite beyond the stretch of my Northern vitals. Therefore, at twelve, it was my habit to leave my Fanning researches for a while, and lunch at the Exchange upon chocolate and sandwiches most delicate in savor. As, one day, I was luxuriously biting one of these, I heard his voice and what he was saying. Both the voice and the interesting order he was giving caused me, at my small table, in the dim back of the room, to stop and watch him where he stood in the light at the counter to the right of the entrance door. Young he was, very young, twenty-two or three at the most, and as he stood, with hat in hand, speaking to the pretty girl behind the counter, his head and side-face were of a romantic and high-strung look. It was a cake that he desired made, a cake for a wedding; and I directly found myself curious to know whose wedding. Even a dull wedding interests me more than other dull events, because it can arouse so much surmise and so much prophecy; but in this wedding I instantly, because of his strange and winning embarrassment, became quite absorbed. How came it he was ordering the cake for it? Blushing like the boy that he was entirely, he spoke in a most engaging voice: “No, not charged; and as you don’t know me, I had better pay for it now.”

Self-possession in his speech he almost had; but the blood in his cheeks and forehead was beyond his control.

A reply came from behind the counter: “We don’t expect payment until delivery.”

“But—a—but on that morning I shall be rather particularly engaged.” His tones sank almost away on these words.

“We should prefer to wait, then. You will leave your address. In half-pound boxes, I suppose?”

“Boxes? Oh, yes—I hadn’t thought—no—just a big, round one. Like this, you know!” His arms embraced a circular space of air. “With plenty of icing.”

I do not think that there was any smile on the other side of the counter; there was, at any rate, no hint of one in the voice. “And how many pounds?”

He was again staggered. “Why—a—I never ordered one before. I want plenty—and the very best, the very best. Each person would eat a pound, wouldn’t they? Or would two be nearer? I think I had better leave it all to you. About like this, you know.” Once more his arms embraced a circular space of air.

Before this I had never heard the young lady behind the counter enter into any conversation with a customer. She would talk at length about all sorts of Kings Port affairs with the older ladies connected with the Exchange, who were frequently to be found there; but with a customer, never. She always took my orders, and my money, and served me, with a silence and a propriety that have become, with ordinary shopkeepers, a lost art. They talk to one indeed! But this slim girl was a lady, and consequently did the right thing, marking and keeping a distance between herself and the public. To-day, however, she evidently felt it her official duty to guide the hapless young, man amid his errors. He now appeared to be committing a grave one.

“Are you quite sure you want that?” the girl was asking.

“Lady Baltimore? Yes, that is what I want.”

“Because,” she began to explain, then hesitated, and looked at him. Perhaps it was in his face; perhaps it was that she remembered at this point the serious difference

between the price of Lady Baltimore (by my small bill-of-fare I was now made acquainted with its price) and the cost of that rich article which convention has prescribed as the cake for weddings; at any rate, swift, sudden delicacy of feeling prevented her explaining any more to him, for she saw how it was: his means were too humble for the approved kind of wedding cake! She was too young, too unskilled yet in the world's ways, to rise above her embarrassment; and so she stood blushing at him behind the counter, while he stood blushing at her in front of it.

At length he succeeded in speaking. "That's all, I believe. Good-morning."

At his hastily departing back she, too, murmured: "Good-morning."

Before I knew it I had screamed out loudly from my table: "But he hasn't told you the day he wants it for!"

Before she knew it she had flown to the door—my cry had set her going, as if I had touched a spring—and there he was at the door himself, rushing back. He, too, had remembered. It was almost a collision, and nothing but their good Southern breeding, the way they took it, saved it from being like a rowdy farce.

"I know," he said simply and immediately. "I am sorry to be so careless. It's for the twenty-seventh."

She was writing it down in the order-book. "Very well. That is Wednesday of next week. You have given us more time than we need." She put complete, impersonal business into her tone; and this time he marched off in good order, leaving peace in the Woman's Exchange.

No, not peace; quiet, merely; the girl at the counter now proceeded to grow indignant with me. We were alone together, we two; no young man, or any other business, occupied her or protected me. But if you suppose that she made war, or expressed rage by speaking, that is not it at

all. From her counter in front to my table at the back she made her displeasure felt; she was inaudibly crushing; she did not do it even with her eye, she managed it—well, with her neck, somehow, and by the way she made her nose look in profile. Aunt Carola would have embraced her—and I should have liked to do so myself. She could not stand the idea of my having, after all these days of official reserve that she had placed between us, startled her into that rush to the door annihilated her dignity at a blow. So did I finish my sandwiches beneath her invisible but eloquent fire. What affair of mine was the cake? And what sort of impertinent, meddlesome person was I, shrieking out my suggestions to people with whom I had no acquaintance? These were the things that her nose and her neck said to me the whole length of the Exchange. I had nothing but my own weakness to thank; it was my interest in weddings that did it, made me forget my decorum, the public place, myself, everything, and plunge in. And I became more and more delighted over it as the girl continued to crush me. My day had been dull, my researches had not brought me a whit nearer royal blood; I looked at my little bill-of-fare, and then I stepped forward to the counter, adventurous, but polite.

“I should like a slice, if you please, of Lady Baltimore,” I said with extreme formality.

I thought she was going to burst; but after an interesting second she replied, “Certainly,” in her fit Regular Exchange tone; only, I thought it trembled a little.

I returned to the table and she brought me the cake, and I had my first felicitous meeting with Lady Baltimore. Oh, my goodness! Did you ever taste it? It’s all soft, and it’s in layers, and it has nuts—but I can’t write any more about it; my mouth waters too much.

Delighted surprise caused me once more to speak aloud, and with my mouth full. “But, dear me, this Is delicious!”

A choking ripple of laughter came from the counter. “It’s I who make them,” said the girl. “I thank you for the unintentional compliment.” Then she walked straight back to my table. “I can’t help it,” she said, laughing still, and her delightful, insolent nose well up; “how can I behave myself when a man goes on as you do?” A nice white curly dog followed her, and she stroked his ears.

“Your behavior is very agreeable to me,” I remarked.

“You’ll allow me to say that you’re not invited to criticise it. I was decidedly put out with you for making me ridiculous. But you have admired my cake with such enthusiasm that you are forgiven. And—may I hope that you are getting on famously with the battle of Cowpens?”

I stared. “I’m frankly very much astonished that you should know about that!”

“Oh, you’re just known all about in Kings Port.”

I wish that our miserable alphabet could in some way render the soft Southern accent which she gave to her words. But it cannot. I could easily misspell, if I chose; but how, even then, could I, for instance, make you hear her way of saying “about”? “Aboot” would magnify it; and besides, I decline to make ugly to the eye her quite special English, that was so charming to the ear.

“Kings Port just knows all about you,” she repeated with a sweet and mocking laugh.

“Do you mind telling me how?”

She explained at once. “This place is death to all incognitos.”

The explanation, however, did not, on the instant, enlighten me. “This? The Woman’s Exchange, you mean?”

“Why, to be sure! Have you not heard ladies talking together here?”

I blankly repealed her words. “Ladies talking?”

She nodded.

“Oh!” I cried. “How dull of me! Ladies talking! Of course!”

She continued. “It was therefore widely known that you were consulting our South Carolina archives at the library—and then that notebook you bring marked you out the very first day. Why, two hours after your first lunch we just knew all about you!”

“Dear me!” said I.

“Kings Port is ever ready to discuss strangers,” she further explained. “The Exchange has been going on five years, and the resident families have discussed each other so thoroughly here that everything is known; therefore a stranger is a perfect boon.” Her gayety for a moment interrupted her, before she continued, always mocking and always sweet: “Kings Port cannot boast intelligence offices for servants; but if you want to know the character and occupation of your friends, come to the Exchange!” How I wish I could give you the raciness, the contagion, of her laughter! Who would have dreamed that behind her primness all this frolic lay in ambush? “Why,” she said, “I’m only a plantation girl; it’s my first week here, and I know every wicked deed everybody as done since 1812!”

She went back to her counter. It had been very merry; and as I was settling the small debt for my lunch I asked: “Since this is the proper place for information, will you kindly tell me whose wedding that cake is for?”

She was astonished. “You don’t know? And I thought you were quite a clever Ya—I beg your pardon—Northerner.

“Please tell me, since I know you’re quite a clever Reb—I beg your pardon—Southerner.”

“Why, it’s his own! Couldn’t you see that from his bashfulness?”

“Ordering his own wedding cake?” Amazement held me. But the door opened, one of the elderly ladies entered, the

girl behind the counter stiffened to primness in a flash, and I went out into Royal Street as the curly dog’s tail wagged his greeting to the newcomer.

III: Kings Port Talks

Table of Contents

Of course I had at once left the letters of introduction which Aunt Carola had given me; but in my ignorance of Kings Port hours I had found everybody at dinner when I made my first round of calls between half-past three and five—an experience particularly regrettable, since I had hurried my own dinner on purpose, not then aware that the hours at my boarding-house were the custom of the whole town. (These hours even since my visit to Kings Port, are beginning to change. But such backsliding is much condemned.) Upon an afternoon some days later, having seen in the extra looking-glass, which I had been obliged to provide for myself, that the part in my back hair was perfect, I set forth again, better informed.

As I rang the first doorbell, another visitor came up the steps, a beautiful old lady in widow's dress, a cardcase in her hand.

"Have you rung, sir?" said she, in a manner at once gentle and voluminous.

"Yes, madam."

Nevertheless she pulled it again. "It doesn't always ring," she explained, "unless one is accustomed to it, which you are not."

She addressed me with authority, exactly like Aunt Carola, and with even greater precision in her good English and good enunciation. Unlike the girl at the Exchange, she had no accent; her language was simply the perfection of educated utterance; it also was racy with the free censoriousness which civilized people of consequence are apt to exercise the world over. "I was sorry to miss your

visit," she began (she knew me, you see, perfectly); "you will please to come again soon, and console me for my disappointment. I am Mrs. Gregory St. Michael, and my house is in Le Maire Street (Pronounced in Kings Port, Lammarree) as you have been so civil as to find out. And how does your Aunt Carola do in these contemptible times? You can tell her from me that vulgarization is descending, even upon Kings Port."

"I cannot imagine that!" I exclaimed.

"You cannot imagine it because you don't know anything about it, young gentleman! The manners of some of our own young people will soon be as dishevelled as those in New York. Have you seen our town yet, or is it all books with you? You should not leave without a look at what is still left of us. I shall be happy if you will sit in my pew on Sunday morning. Your Northern shells did their best in the bombardment—did you say that you rang? I think you had better pull it again; all the way out; yes, like that—in the bombardment, but we have our old church still, in spite of you. Do you see the crack in that wall? The earthquake did it. You're spared earthquakes in the North, as you seem to be spared pretty much everything disastrous—except the prosperity that's going to ruin you all. We're better off with our poverty than you. Just ring the bell once more, and then we'll go. I fancy Julia—I fancy Mrs. Weguelin St. Michael—has run out to stare at the Northern steam yacht in the harbor. It would be just like her. This house is historic itself. Shabby enough now, to be sure! The great-aunt of my cousin, John Mayrant (who is going to be married next Wednesday, to such a brute of a girl, poor boy!), lived here in 1840, and made an answer to the Earl of Mainridge that put him in his place. She was our famous Kings Port wit, and at the reception which her father (my mother's uncle) gave the English visitor, he conducted himself as so many Englishmen seem to think they can in this country. Miss

Beaufain (pronounced in Kings Port, Bowfayne), as she was then, asked the Earl how he liked America; and he replied, very well, except for the people, who were so vulgar. ‘What can you expect?’ said Miss Beaufain; ‘we’re descended from the English.’ Mrs. St. Michael is out, and the servant has gone home. Slide this card under the door, with your own, and come away.”

She took me with her, moving through the quiet South Place with a leisurely grace and dignity at which my spirit rejoiced; she was so beautiful, and so easy, and afraid of nothing and nobody! (This must be modified. I came later to suspect that they all stood in some dread of their own immediate families.)

In the North, everybody is afraid of something: afraid of the legislature, afraid of the trusts, afraid of the strikes, afraid of what the papers will say, of what the neighbors will say, of what the cook will say; and most of all, and worst of all, afraid to be different from the general pattern, afraid to take a step or speak a syllable that shall cause them to be thought unlike the monotonous millions of their fellow-citizens; the land of the free living in ceaseless fear! Well, I was already afraid of Mrs. Gregory St. Michael. As we walked and she talked, I made one or two attempts at conversation, and speedily found that no such thing was the lady’s intention: I was there to listen; and truly I could wish nothing more agreeable, in spite of my desire to hear further about next Wednesday’s wedding and the brute of a girl. But to this subject Mrs. St. Michael did not return. We crossed Worship Street and Chancel Street, and were nearing the East Place where a cannon was being shown me, a cannon with a history and an inscription concerning the “war for Southern independence, which I presume your prejudice calls the Rebellion,” said my guide. “There’s Mrs. St. Michael now, coming round the corner. Well, Julia, could you read the yacht’s name with your naked eye? And what’s the name of

the gambler who owns it? He’s a gambler, or he couldn’t own a yacht—unless his wife’s a gambler’s daughter.”

“How well you’re feeling to-day, Maria!” said the other lady, with a gentle smile.

“Certainly. I have been talking for twenty minutes.” I was now presented to Mrs. Weguelin St. Michael, also old, also charming, in widow’s dress no less in the bloom of age than Mrs. Gregory, but whiter and very diminutive. She shyly welcomed me to Kings Port. “Take him home with you, Julia. We pulled your bell three times, and it’s too damp for you to be out. Don’t forget,” Mrs. Gregory said to me, “that you haven’t told me a word about your Aunt Carola, and that I shall expect you to come and do it.” She went slowly away from us, up the East Place, tall, graceful, sweeping into the distance like a ship. No haste about her dignified movement, no swinging of elbows, nothing of the present hour!

“What a beautiful girl she must have been!” I murmured aloud, unconsciously.

“No, she was not a beauty in her youth,” said my new guide in her shy voice, “but always fluent, always a wit. Kings Port has at times thought her tongue too downright. We think that wit runs in her family, for young John Mayrant has it; and her first-cousin-once-removed put the Earl of Mainridge in his place at her father’s ball in 1840. Miss Beaufain (as she was then) asked the Earl how he liked America; and he replied, very well, except for the people, who were so vulgar. ‘What can you expect?’ said Miss Beaufain; ‘we’re descended from the English.’ I am very sorry for Maria—for Mrs. St. Michael—just at present. Her young cousin, John Mayrant, is making an alliance deeply vexatious to her. Do you happen to know Miss Hortense Rieppe?”

I had never heard of her.

“No? She has been North lately. I thought you might have met her. Her father takes her North, I believe, whenever any one will invite them. They have sometimes managed to make it extend through an unbroken year. Newport, I am credibly informed, greatly admires her. We in Kings Port have never (except John Mayrant, apparently) seen anything in her beauty, which Northerners find so exceptional.”

“What is her type?” I inquired.

“I consider that she looks like a steel wasp. And she has the assurance to call herself a Kings Port girl. Her father calls himself a general, and it is repeated that he ran away at the battle of Chattanooga. I hope you will come to see me another day, when you can spare time from the battle of Cowpens. I am Mrs. Weguelin St. Michael, the other lady is Mrs. Gregory St. Michael. I wonder if you will keep us all straight?” And smiling, the little lady, whose shy manner and voice I had found to veil as much spirit as her predecessor’s, dismissed me and went up her steps, letting herself into her own house.

The boy in question, the boy of the cake, John Mayrant, was coming out of the gate at which I next rang. The appearance of his boyish figure and well-carried head struck me anew, as it had at first; from his whole person one got at once a strangely romantic impression. He looked at me, made as if he would speak, but passed on. Probably he had been hearing as much about me as I had been hearing about him. At this house the black servant had not gone home for the night, and if the mistress had been out to take a look at the steam yacht, she had returned.

“My sister,” she said, presenting me to a supremely fine-looking old lady, more chiselled, more august, than even herself. I did not catch this lady’s name, and she confined herself to a distant, though perhaps not unfriendly, greeting. She was sitting by a work-table, and she resumed some

embroidery of exquisite appearance, while my hostess talked to me.

Both wore their hair in a simple fashion to suit their years, which must have been seventy or more; both were dressed with the dignity that such years call for; and I may mention here that so were all the ladies above a certain age in this town of admirable old-fashioned propriety. In New York, in Boston, in Philadelphia, ladies of seventy won't be old ladies any more; they're unwilling to wear their years avowedly, in quiet dignity by their firesides; they bare their bosoms and gallop egregiously to the ball-rooms of the young; and so we lose a particular graciousness that Kings Port retains, a perspective of generations. We happen all at once, with no background, in a swirl of haste and similarity.

One of the many things which came home to me during the conversation that now began (so many more things came home than I can tell you!) was that Mrs. Gregory St. Michael's tongue was assuredly "downright" for Kings Port. This I had not at all taken in while she talked to me, and her friend's reference to it had left me somewhat at a loss. That better precision and choice of words which I have mentioned, and the manner in which she announced her opinions, had put me in mind of several fine ladles whom I had known in other parts of the world; but hers was an individual manner, I was soon to find, and by no means the Kings Port convention. This convention permitted, indeed, condemnations of one's neighbor no less sweeping, but it conveyed them in a phraseology far more restrained.

"I cannot regret your coming to Kings Port," said my hostess, after we had talked for a little while, and I had complimented the balmy March weather and the wealth of blooming flowers; "but I fear that Fanning is not a name that you will find here. It belongs to North Carolina."

I smiled and explained that North Carolina Fannings were useless to me. "And, if I may be so bold, how well you are

acquainted with my errand!”

I cannot say that my hostess smiled, that would be too definite; but I can say that she did not permit herself to smile, and that she let me see this repression. “Yes,” she said, “we are acquainted with your errand, though not with its motive.”

I sat silent, thinking of the Exchange.

My hostess now gave me her own account of why all things were known to all people in this town. “The distances in your Northern cities are greater, and their population is much greater. There are but few of us in Kings Port.” In these last words she plainly told me that those “few” desired no others. She next added: “My nephew, John Mayrant, has spoken of you at some length.”

I bowed. “I had the pleasure to see and hear him order a wedding cake.”

“Yes. From Eliza La Heu (pronounced Layhew), my niece; he is my nephew, she is my niece on the other side. My niece is a beginner at the Exchange. We hope that she will fulfil her duties there in a worthy manner. She comes from a family which is schooled to meet responsibilities.”

I bowed again; again it seemed fitting. “I had not, until now, known the charming girl’s name,” I murmured.

My hostess now bowed slightly. “I am glad that you find her charming.”

“Indeed, yes!” I exclaimed.

“We, also, are pleased with her. She is of good family—for the up-country.”

Once again our alphabet fails me. The peculiar shade of kindness, of recognition, of patronage, which my agreeable hostess (and all Kings Port ladies, I soon noticed) imparted to the word “up-country” cannot be conveyed except by the human voice—and only a Kings Port voice at that. It is a

much lighter damnation than what they make of the phrase “from Georgia,” which I was soon to hear uttered by the lips of the lady. “And so you know about his wedding cake?”

“My dear madam, I feel that I shall know about everything.”

Her gray eyes looked at me quietly for a moment. “That is possible. But although we may talk of ourselves to you, we scarcely expect you to talk of ourselves to us.”

Well, my pertness had brought me this quite properly! And I received it properly. “I should never dream—” I hastened to say; “even without your warning. I find I’m expected to have seen the young lady of his choice,” I now threw out. My accidental words proved as miraculous as the staff which once smote the rock. It was a stream, indeed, which now broke forth from her stony discretion. She began easily. “It is evident that you have not seen Miss Rieppe by the manner in which you allude to her—although of course, in comparison with my age, she is a young girl.” I think that this caused me to open my mouth.

“The disparity between her years and my nephew’s is variously stated,” continued the old lady. “But since John’s engagement we have all of us realized that love is truly blind.”

I did not open my mouth any more; but my mind’s mouth was wide open.

My hostess kept it so. “Since John Mayrant was fifteen he has had many loves; and for myself, knowing him and believing in him as I do, I feel confident that he will make no connection distasteful to the family when he really comes to marry.”

This time I gasped outright. “But—the cake!—next Wednesday!”

She made, with her small white hand, a slight and slighting gesture. “The cake is not baked yet, and we shall

see what we shall see.” From this onward until the end a pinkness mounted in her pale, delicate cheeks, and deep, strong resentment burned beneath her discreetly expressed indiscretions. “The cake is not baked, and I, at least, am not solicitous. I tell my cousin, Mrs. Gregory St. Michael, that she must not forget it was merely his phosphates. That girl would never have looked at John Mayrant had it not been for the rumor of his phosphates. I suppose some one has explained to you her pretensions of birth. Away from Kings Port she may pass for a native of this place, but they come from Georgia. It cannot be said that she has met with encouragement from us; she, however, easily recovers from such things. The present generation of young people in Kings Port has little enough to remind us of what we stood for in manners and customs, but we are not accountable for her, nor for her father. I believe that he is called a general. His conduct at Chattanooga was conspicuous for personal prudence. Both of them are skillful in never knowing poor people—but the Northerners they consort with must really be at a loss how to bestow their money. Of course, such Northerners cannot realize the difference between Kings Port and Georgia, and consequently they make much of her. Her features do undoubtedly possess beauty. A Newport woman—the new kind—has even taken her to Worth! And yet, after all, she has remained for John. We heard a great deal of her men, too. She took care of that, of course. John Mayrant actually followed her to Newport.

“But,” I couldn’t help crying out, “I thought he was so poor!”

“The phosphates,” my hostess explained. “They had been discovered on his land. And none of her New York men had come forward. So John rushed back happy.” At this point a very singular look came over the face of my hostess, and she continued: “There have been many false reports (and false hopes in consequence) based upon the phosphate

discoveries. It was I who had to break it to him—what further investigation had revealed. Poor John!”

“He has, then, nothing?” I inquired.

“His position in the Custom House, and a penny or two from his mother’s fortune.”

“But the cake?” I now once again reminded her.

My hostess lifted her delicate hand and let it fall. Her resentment at the would-be intruder by marriage still mounted. “Not even from that pair would I have believed such a thing possible!” she exclaimed; and she went into a long, low, contemplative laugh, looking not at me, but at the fire. Our silent companion continued to embroider. “That girl,” my hostess resumed, “and her discreditable father played on my nephew’s youth and chivalry to the tune of—well, you have heard the tune.”

“You mean—you mean—?” I couldn’t quite take it in.

“Yes. They rattled their poverty at him until he offered and they accepted.”

I must have stared grotesquely now. “That—that—the cake—and that sort of thing—at his expense?

“My dear sir, I shall be glad if you can find me anything that they have ever done at their own expense!”

I doubt if she would ever have permitted her speech such freedom had not the Rieppes been “from Georgia”; I am sure that it was anger—family anger, race anger—which had broken forth; and I think that her silent, severe sister scarcely approved of such breaking forth to me, a stranger. But indignation had worn her reticence thin, and I had happened to press upon the weak place. After my burst of exclamation I came back to it. “So you think Miss Rieppe will get out of it?”

“It is my nephew who will ‘get out of it,’ as you express it.”

I totally misunderstood her. “Oh!” I protested stupidly. “He doesn’t look like that. And it takes all meaning from the cake.”

“Do not say cake to me again!” said the lady, smiling at last. “And—will you allow me to tell you that I do not need to have my nephew, John Mayrant, explained to me by any one? I merely meant to say that he, and not she, is the person who will make the lucky escape. Of course, he is honorable—a great deal too much so for his own good. It is a misfortune, nowadays, to be born a gentleman in America. But, as I told you, I am not solicitous. What she is counting on—because she thinks she understands true Kings Port honor, and does not in the least—is his renouncing her on account of the phosphates—the bad news, I mean. They could live on what he has—not at all in her way, though—and besides, after once offering his genuine, ardent, foolish love—for it was genuine enough at the time—John would never—”

She stopped; but I took her up. “Did I understand you to say that his love was genuine at the lime?”

“Oh, he thinks it is now—insists it is now! That is just precisely what would make him—do you not see?—stick to his colors all the closer.”

“Goodness!” I murmured. “What a predicament!”

But my hostess nodded easily. “Oh, no. You will see. They will all see.”

I rose to take my leave; my visit, indeed, had been, for very interest, prolonged beyond the limits of formality—my hostess had attended quite thoroughly to my being entertained. And at this point the other, the more severe and elderly lady, made her contribution to my entertainment. She had kept silence, I now felt sure, because gossip was neither her habit nor to her liking. Possibly she may have also felt that her displeasure had